

Anderson Independent-Mail editorial
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Food for the body, sustenance for the spirit: Add quality of life to a life lived alone

It was an unfortunate choice of words when a spokesman for Gov. Mark Sanford referred to cutting additional money for meals to more than 5,000 homebound seniors as part of the governor's budget proposal as "a relatively small reduction" when compared to the program's total cost.

We suppose it is, if one is talking about money. But the programs overseen by the Lt. Governor's Office on Aging and administered locally through Senior Solutions in Anderson and Oconee counties are about more than a hot meal. They offer a double dose of nourishment: food for the body and sustenance for the spirit, a connection with the world outside in what otherwise might be a solitary, even lonely, existence.

How can we place a price on that, even in a lean budget year?

Lt. Gov. Andre Bauer, who has surprised many with his dedication to senior issues and his push for more attention to be paid to the needs of this large portion of South Carolina's population, is optimistic lawmakers will retain the funds in the budget. "When I go to the legislature with aging issues, they respond," Mr. Bauer said Friday. "It's a nonpartisan issue. They realize how important this program is."

"We support three services with the supplemental funds we currently receive from the state," said Doug Wright, executive director of Senior Solutions. "About 208 clients are served every day, including 34 who receive home care visits, 158 clients with meal delivery and 16 clients in our day care program."

Overall, through a variety of financial support, including Anderson and Oconee county governments, United Way, the state's supplement and federal funding, they care for the needs of 600 to 700 people every day in the two counties. The possible loss of the supplemental funds is on top of cuts they were directed to make in January. They've had to cut back on home care, he said, putting some clients back on a waiting list that already numbered 80.

Without a nutritious meal, "health deteriorates, physical and mental," Mr. Wright said. "People would end up in some higher means of medical attention."

Mr. Bauer echoed those sentiments. "Anytime you can keep folks out of nursing homes or emergency rooms, it's a positive thing," he said.

Spending the money now to provide a healthy meal will enable more elderly to stay in their homes and not be subject to more expensive care in the years to come. Improper nourishment can lead to other physical problems such as falls, which are common injuries among the elderly.

According to the Office on Aging, nursing home placements cost an average of \$45,000 a year, and even a single night in the hospital for an elderly person can run to the low five figures, depending upon the care needed.

Our state's programs for the elderly offer not just what is likely the only hot meal a person will have in the day, but nutritional advice, exercise programs, even just a place to sit and talk with others about the problems that come with aging: the loss of a spouse, the loss of friends, sometimes even the loss of one's sense of still being a part of things.

It's amazing what a little conversation, a connection with others, can add to the quality of one's life. "The comfort of seeing another human being, in many cases, the only person they will see all day" during a home visit improves life for the homebound, Mr. Wright said. "They look forward to this person coming, it is the light of their day. That one or two hours of contact is enough to keep these folks in their homes."

Sen. Thomas Alexander, R-Oconee/Pickens, and Sen. Billy O'Dell, R-Anderson /Abbeville /Greenwood, have "gone to bat to obtain more funding for seniors," Mr. Bauer said. "Both have actively sought and obtained grant money for their respective counties." Rep. Brian White, R-Anderson, has also been of special help, he said.

He was equally enthusiastic about the efforts at Senior Solutions, including senior day care. "I wish we had a senior center like Anderson's in every county in the state," he said.

The legislature gave the Office on Aging an additional \$2.9 million in early 2006 to add 5,476 seniors to the list of those receiving a hot meal. It was one-time money, which is part of the governor's dispute with the way the program is administered, a position we can respect.

But put that dispute aside for a moment and imagine you are now on a list that brings someone to your home every day, a person who will listen to your stories — even if they have heard them before — and will even sit with you while you eat, so you don't have to eat alone. They will bring you your medicine and they will gently make sure you take it. And they will help you feel that you have not been forgotten.

And then all that goes away.

In a population of millions, 5,476 people may not seem like a lot.

Until, that is, we think of them as neighbors, not numbers.

We urge the legislature to keep this money in the budget, to remember them as people, not statistics.